

Low ridership threatens local bus service

Service improvements, fare increases key to future of Milton Transit, according to draft strategic plan

By Tim Foran
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Milton Mayor Gord Krantz has warned the Milton Transit bus system could be eliminated if ridership doesn't increase enough to improve the cost recovery ratio of the system.

"The cliché and I've been using it all along is, 'Use it or lose it,'" Krantz said at a recent community services committee meeting during discussion on the 2009-13 draft strategic plan for Milton Transit, which will be the subject of a public input session this Tuesday at the Milton Seniors' Activity Centre.

The current cost recovery ratio for Milton Transit is about 20 per cent, but the draft plan foresees that increasing to 34 per cent by 2011.

That increase could be realized through a variety of measures, including a fare increase following an initial period of service improvements including the introduction of Saturday service, the plan states.

For a one-time ticket, the proposed fare would only be increased 25 cents to \$2.75, though the current price of 50 cents if the rider has a GO ticket would remain in place and children under six years old would continue to ride for free.

However, the proposed fare hike would hit regular users who buy cheaper 10-ticket sheets or monthly passes the hardest. The proposed changes include:

- For adults, increasing the cost of a sheet of 10 tickets to \$23 from the current \$20 and a monthly pass to \$65 from the current \$56.
- For seniors, increasing the cost of a sheet of 10 tickets to \$20 from the current \$14 and a monthly pass to \$50 from the current \$38.50.
- For students, increasing the cost of a sheet of 10 tickets to \$20 from the current \$16 and a monthly pass to \$55 from the current \$45.

Other ways to raise the cost-recovery ratio include realizing savings by moving to a single contractor, ridership increases due to better and more widely available service, and more stringent eligibility requirements for the accessible transit service, the plan states.

Krantz said he's pleased that the report envisions a cut in the per capita subsidy to \$5.45 from the current \$10.70, as he believes it's necessary for the transit service to start operating with less municipal funding.

"There comes a time when we have to fish or cut bait and that goes for transit," Krantz said.

Milton's current operating budget includes \$1.7 million for Milton transit, while four times that amount is spent on roads. The capital budget includes about a half million for the transit service with \$9.6 million for roads.

The capital budget for transit is minimal partially due to the ineligibility for significant transit projects to be recouped through development charges. For example, the developer of a single-family home in Milton pays just under \$18,000 to the Region and the Town in roads and transportation charges, but only \$34 to Milton Transit.

Among the plan's other draft recommendations is to increase service reliability by purchasing more spare buses for periods when the Town's four Bluebird buses are out of service, a problem that has plagued the municipal transit system since it acquired the buses. The difficulty keeping those buses in service has led some riders to give up on the service, though some have been returning as reliability has improved since last fall, according to the consultants who prepared the plan.

Another recommendation is to combine existing routes 1 and 5 and add two routes to service new subdivisions, especially on Scott Boulevard in the residen-

tial community west of the CN tracks. Other existing routes could be modified so that buses run in the heart of residential communities on collector roads as opposed to plying some of the major arterial roads where there are no homes.

Richard Pucini, a representative of Dillon Consulting Ltd., which prepared the strategic plan, said after the community services meeting he didn't expect an uproar from Milton residents once buses start running along their roads. However, he said council might run into issues with residents who don't want a bus stop in front of their home.

"I'm prepared to deal with that," Ward 4 Councillor Paul Scherer told the *Champion*, though he noted the proposed routes are not set in stone. "If you're going to upset the odd one (resident), so be it. The number one acid test is, are you doing the right thing overall?"

Scherer, along with some other councillors, expressed concern that staff presented them with the 184-page draft plan only a few days before the community services meeting. However, he said his initial

analysis led him to believe that the plan is recommending a Milton Transit service that tries to do too much, but nothing well enough for his liking.

"I am not in favour of expanding this service and crossing our fingers and hoping people will come," he explained.

He said he wants Milton Transit to first improve its service to its core customer base, which consists mainly of weekday commuters, before worrying about service expansion.

"For a guy schlepping his way to downtown Toronto, why can't he see online real time bus information?" Scherer asked staff. "They (travellers) understand problems, they understand storms, they don't understand why they can't get information before they step outside."

The Town's public meeting on the strategic plan will be held from 2 to 4 p.m. and 6 to 8:30 p.m. with presentations at 2:30 and 7 p.m.

Those unable to attend can review and comment on the plan online at www.milton.ca until May 13. Council will debate a final report at its meeting May 25.

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If the adoption order was made before September 1, 2008, adopted adults and birth parents can file a disclosure veto to prevent the release of the information.

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